

St. Mary's Mission (Roman Catholic)
1 mi. south of Fort Owen, on west
side of the town of Stevensville
Stevensville
Ravalli County
Montana

HABS No. MON-10

HABS
MONT
41-STEVE
1-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
801 19th Street, N.W.
Washington, D. C. 20006

ST. MARY'S MISSION

Stevensville, Ravalli County, Montana

ADDRESS: Stevensville, Montana

OWNER: The Catholic Church

OCCUPANT: None

USE: A Chapel

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In 1841 the first Catholic mission in the Northwest Territory was founded on the Bitterroot River by Father Jean DeSmet, a Jesuit priest, to serve the Salish (Flathead) Indians. The original mission, now gone, was abandoned in 1850 when the land and improvements were sold to John Owen who built a trading fort on the site.

In 1866 the Jesuits returned to the area and Father Anthony Ravalli (designer and builder of the famed Sacred Heart Mission, Cataldo, Idaho; ID-1) erected the present St. Mary's Mission.

The building is a major tourist attraction in this part of the Bitterroot Valley.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The history of the Christianizing of the Indians of Montana and northern Idaho centers about the activities of Father Jean DeSmet and a small group of Jesuit priests. The Flathead tribe sent several deputations from Montana to St. Louis seeking "Black Robes" to return with them to the Rockies over a period of years, and in 1839 met Father DeSmet and told him of their search.

The next spring Father DeSmet with Young Ignace, one of the Indians, as a guide, set out for Montana. They met a delegation from the Flathead tribe at Green River in Wyoming, then moved on into Montana, traveling with a large Indian band. On Sunday, July 26, 1840, on the banks of the Upper Red Rock Lake, he celebrated the first Mass to be offered in the Territory of Montana. He remained with the band, preaching and converting the Indians until August 27, 1840, when he took leave of them to return to St. Louis to get help in his enterprise.

On August 15, 1840, the Flathead Indians rendezvoused at Fort Hall on the Snake River with Father DeSmet and his companions: two priests, Fathers Nicholas Point and Gregory Mengarini; three brothers, William Claessens, Joseph Specht and Charles Huet. The group arrived in the area of the present town of Stevensville on September 24, 1841, and located the site of the mission some twenty-five miles south of Hell's Gate on the Bitterroot River.

Soon a log cabin and Montana's first mission church were erected. Around them they built a sort of fort protected by bastions. The mission prospered, and in 1846 the little log church was replaced by a larger, more elaborate building. The interior of this church (which is not the same one standing today) was recorded in a sketch by Father Point.

Father Anthony Ravalli was assigned to St. Mary's in 1845, and helped build the first grist mill in Montana. This water-powered mill was set up with two twelve inch buhrstones that had been given to the Jesuits in Antwerp and had traveled with Father Ravalli from Europe around Cape Horn to Oregon, then overland to St. Mary's Mission. Then the flour mill was followed by Montana's first saw mill, built by Father Ravalli and Father Mengarini.

Though St. Mary's was prospering in 1845, it was experiencing trouble with the Indians by 1850. This, together with a need to send priests to California to open missions in that newly-booming area, led to the abandonment of St. Mary's. On November 5, 1850, the property and improvements were sold to Major John Owen for the sum of \$250. The bill of sale is one of the earliest written contracts of any kind in Montana. Major Owen established a trading post there, calling it Fort Owen (MON-12).

That the Jesuits hoped to return to St. Mary's is verified by a stipulation in the sale contract that the improvements were to revert to the fathers should they return on or before the first day of January, 1852. But it was not until 1866 when the Black Gowns -- the name given to the Jesuit Fathers by the Indians -- came back to reopen the mission.

Father Giorda and Father Ravalli had been at St. Peter's mission (near present-day Ulm, Montana) until April 27, 1866, when Indian unrest forced the mission to close and the priests and brothers fled to St. Ignatius. In September, 1866, they and Brother Claessens returned to "dear old St. Mary's" which was in ruins, and built another church there. The new St. Mary's was dedicated on October 28, 1866.

Father Ravalli did not remain at St. Mary's at this time, but was assigned to St. Michael's at Hell's Gate. This church had been primarily to serve the whites in the area; it was located between St. Mary's and St. Ignatius about one days ride from each. Father Ravalli spent three years at Hell's Gate, serving in the double role of priest and physician. When not occupied there, he made frequent missionary journeys to St. Mary's.

MON-10
41-STEVEN
1-

MON-10
Page 3

The new altar for St. Mary's was designed and built by Father Ravalli. It is placed under an alcove, and on each side of it are wooden candlesticks that he carved. The alcove's intricate scroll work was also carved by the priest, and he fashioned from plaster an almost life-size statue of St. Ignatius dressed in a deerhide cassock which he painted a somber Jesuit black.

Father Ravalli lived out his later years at St. Mary's, and supervised the expansion of the church building. He wrote to Father Palladino in a letter dated December 8, 1789, saying: "Here we have quite reformed our Chapel. It is double in length than before, and the inside is nicely fixed by the carpenter well known by you, Dick Barry. When the work is finished, I believe our Chapel will be really decent."

In addition to Father Ravalli's architectural and artistic talents, he was also a physician, serving both Indians and whites from the little pharmacy building beside the church. He answered a call from a near-frozen miner during a blizzard one night and soon became ill from the outing. His illness was followed by a stroke, and he was paralyzed from the waist down for the last four years of his life. He refused to stop his work, however, and continued to make sick calls and visit his parishioners riding on a canvas cot mounted on a spring wagon.

Father Jerome D'Aste assumed charge of St. Mary's in 1876, and kept a diary of events at the mission. The entry dated October 2, 1884, was brief: "Fr. Ravalli died this morning about 8 o'clock after over two months and a half of lingering and severe suffering." Father Ravalli is buried in the graveyard behind the little mission church among the Indians and whites he had served.

St. Mary's did not long survive after his death. On October 17, 1891, the Flatheads gave up their home in the Bitterroot Valley and were moved to the reservation near St. Ignatius. The Jesuits continued to visit the mission until 1908, when a parish was established in the nearby town of Hamilton. In 1954, a new church was built south of the still-standing St. Mary's Chapel to serve the town of Stevensville.

Unfortunately, little is actually known of the early day activities of St. Mary's. Many records seem not to have been kept, and some of those that did exist were lost in a river crossing, as were many of the mission's religious artifacts, when the mission was closed and the priests left in 1850.

MONT.
HISTORICAL
1-

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL AND SOURCES

- Antrei, Albert, "Father Pierre Jean DeSmet," Montana, the Magazine of Western History, vol. XIII, No. 2, Spring, 1963.
- Dunbar, Seymour and Phillips, Paul C., The Journals and Letters of Major John Owen, 1850-1871, Edward Eberstadt, N.Y., 1927.
- Fletcher, Bob, "Montana Medley: Sky Pilots," Montana, the Magazine of Western History, vol. III, no. 2, Spring, 1953.
- Gilluly, Bob, "Bitterroot Valley, Scene of Historical 'Firsts'," Montana Parade, Great Falls Tribune, Great Falls, Montana, May 3, 1964.
- Palladino, L. B., Indian and White in the Northwest; A History of Catholicity in Montana, 1831-1891, Wickersham Publishing Co., Lancaster, 1922.
- Schoenberg, Wilfred, S. J., Jesuits in Montana, The Oregon Jesuit (publisher) Portland, 1960.
- Schoenberg, Wilfred, S. J., "Memorandum Regarding St. Mary's Existing Log Church", Gonzaga University, Seattle, Wash., March 26, 1965.
- Stout, Tom, Montana: Its Story and Biography, vol. 3, Lewis Publishing Co., Chicago, 1913.
- Weisel, George F., Men and Trade on the Northwest Frontier, Montana State University Press, Missoula, 1955.

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

EXTERIOR

Overall Dimensions - 86'-6" x 20'-4" including the vestibule and living quarters. One story in height, plus the belfry.

Foundation - Original was probably stone. A new concrete foundation supports the building today.

Wall Construction - Square hewn logs pegged with the cracks filled clay; approximate thickness 9". The front (east) facade is covered by 1 x 6 lap siding nailed directly to the logs and painted white.

Belfry - The church belfry was damaged by fire and has been restored. Structural timbers are connected with wooden pegs. Dome is constructed of random width boards covered with building felt and painted silver. Cross is not original.

Openings - Entrance: two four-panel wood doors.

Entrance to living quarters and priests' study: two single doors of sawn planks.

Windows: 4/4 light double hung in main church and 6/6 light double hung in living quarters.

Roof - Wood shingles, approximately 35°.

Chimney - one brick chimney extends through the roof in the north-west corner of the front room addition.

INTERIOR

Floor Plan - exterior entrance vestibule, 6'-2" x 6'-1½", forms bottom part of belfry. To the left (south) inside of the church a 2'-9" wide staircase (L-shaped) in the corner leads to the choir balcony. A door seals off the staircase. To the right is the confessional - a two-compartment unit 3'-3" deep and 3'-0" and 3'-2" wide respectively.

Four wooden columns, two on each side, support the balcony that runs the full width of the building. The balcony extends from the front (east) wall and provides a height beneath of 7'-10¼". Overall floor thickness is 8½" and the decorative rail is 1'-11½" high.

The front part of the church, including the belfry and balcony, is an addition put on in 1879, practically doubling the interior seating space of the church. The addition is evident externally as well as internally although the walls and roof lines were simply extended. Internally the original front wall is framed by a large centered opening 12'-8" in width, formed by wooden pilasters 12'-3" high of a pseudo-Doric design. These side walls are 3'-0" in width on the north side of the opening and 3'-2" on the south, and extend to the ceiling. The opening has a relatively flat arch whose center point is 14'-9" above the finish floor.

The front room is 18'-10" wide by 23'-9" long. The second (original) room is also 18'-10" wide and is 22'-3" long, including the communion rail and altar recess. The wall that forms the recess is 4" thick, and behind the altar wall is a storage area 2'-7" deep.

The altar rests within an alcove formed of three circular arches; the central and largest forms a recess for the altar. The two side arches cap false doors. Behind this wall is a storage area accessible from a small doorway in the study.

Behind the rear or west wall two rooms were added for living quarters and a study. These rooms are 12'-0" in length and extend the width of the church.

Walls - Today they are wood paneled and painted. The panelling was probably added during the remodeling of 1879.

Ceiling - Covered by the same narrow boards as the walls and follows the rafter line until it meets the collar beam, then runs horizontally to the other rafter line.

A wood wainscot 3'-8" high runs around the interior except in the altar area.

Doors - One door leads to the balcony staircase and is made of the same material as the walls.

Interior Decor - The ornate wood altar and the canopy were hand-carved by Father Anthony Ravalli. The communion rail no doubt was also made by him. Behind the communion rail and on each side of the building are two pedestal and baldachino units, one of which houses the plaster statue of St. Ignatius made by Father Ravalli.

Floor - Simple sawn plank floor visible today may have been laid during the 1879 remodeling.

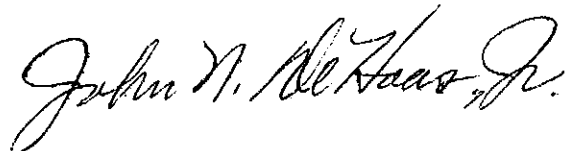
Pews - Simple wooden pews have been installed for use by the white people. The Indian preferred to sit on the floor.

SITE

Recent research indicates that the existing building is not, as often assumed, located on the site of either the first crude chapel built in 1841 nor the bigger church of 1845. It is located about a mile south of Fort Owen on the west side of the small town of Stevensville. The area has been extensively altered over the years by addition of streets and a new church built just south of the chapel.

The property extends westward several hundred yards to a cemetery containing graves of whites as well as Indians. Here rests also Father Ravalli.

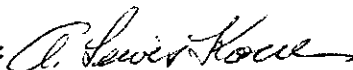
Prepared by,



John N. DeHaas, Jr.
Architect

May 1967

APPROVED:



A. Lewis Koue, FAIA
Supervising Architect
Historic Structures and HABS
San Francisco Planning and Service Center
National Park Service

DATE: